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EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT AS DEFINING FACTOR IN SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN CONTEMPORARY SPAIN

Abstract

One especially relevant key theme in Sociology of Education is to what extent parents' cultural level has significant implications in students' educational achievement and, as a consequence, in the social mobility inherently linked to level of education and professional training. In order to investigate this aspect on current Spanish society, our purpose has been to make an analysis based on data coming from public opinion surveys carried out by major sociological and statistical Spanish institutions. Since recently, these data are freely available to researchers, what makes possible the access to viewpoints of large samples of respondents. In short, with a view in the two-generation transit throughout the Spanish educational system, we will observe the validity of patterns of social and cultural inequality still *influencing* -though not *determining*- the educational achievement of Spanish population and, therefore, its professional development.

'Cultural capital' in contemporary Spanish society as a *defining* element of intergenerational transmission

Some decades ago, the concept of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970) was coined pursuing to disclose economically-based class relations that underlay differences in performance in education, and offering, as well, a way to question the dominant educational discourse. The term became a watershed in analysis and reflections about the nature of the educational system, and developed into one of the main spotlights in contemporary Sociology of Education. From 1970 on, social landscape in the so-called Western societies has changed dramatically, moving from an industrial setting to a post-industrial one, where validity of class-based assumptions is approached in a different -and frequently sceptical- way.

Even though it could be theoretically legitimate and appropriate, we are not aiming now to analyze in depth the validity of 1970 Bourdieu and Passeron's claims, with all its theoretical connotations, but just to approach the current Spanish educational reality with a view on a factor whose relevance was originally put forward by these authors. In this sense, according to data from Spanish Institute National for Assessment of Quality of Educational System (INECSE, 2005), parents' educational level turns out to be an adequate explanatory factor to be kept in mind for an appropriate understanding of the social reality of education, since there is a parallel progression between children's results and parents' level of studies in every area of knowledge. The same research quantifies with Pearson's correlation index the link between family's cultural level and achievement in Spanish language (0.285), Maths (0.307) and Social and Natural Sciences (*Conocimiento del medio*) (0.314) (INECSE, 2005, pp. 98, 150 and 61), which gives us a more precise numerical expression of something that is hardly expressed with such accuracy through words. In all the cases, the differences are statistically significant.

The concept *cultural capital* itself provides us with a meaningful frame to analyse the relevance of intergenerational transmissions in the particular Spanish case in two steps: firstly, in educational achievement, where some significant influences can easily be observed; secondly, we will try to make clear for this paper's readers how educational level acts as a key element strongly *defining* -though not *determining*- positions in labour market, with special reference to the peculiarities of the Spanish one. It was many years ago when Lester C. Thurow posed the *theory of the employment queue* (Thurow, 1983) as a criticism of the classic *theory of human capital*, originally formulated in relation to education by Theodore W. Schultz (Schultz, 1968) and Gary Becker (Becker, 1983), which emphasized the value of investments in training for economic promotion, both in the personal and collective sense. From Thurow's viewpoint, this was a valid approach only for welfare economic periods, but in recession ones the adequacy between qualifications and economic demand would be far from complete. In these contexts, education becomes a defensive weapon, and it is no longer a way to achieve better incomes.

In Spain, a main factor to weigh the extent to which a particular position in workforce can be considered more or less successful or favourable is unemployment rate, due to the special characteristics of the Spanish labour market. Only workers with University qualifications offer an unemployment rate significantly below the national average, which indicates a, comparatively speaking, more favourable starting point in the employment race, so especially difficult in Spain (INECSE, 2004, p. 3). In our data, we will observe the validity of Thurow's approach nowadays, particularly in relation to stability in public sector work. Strongly linked to the issues above, other factors are amenable to be analysed. Thus, it could be weighed to what extent the so-called 'cultural capital' is linked to 'economic capital'.

Parents' cultural background: incidence in educational attainment and further studies expectations

When it comes to go deeper into the reasons that underpin these aforementioned widely spread cultural influences, we should turn to the role of culturally-based background, with a double meaning. Firstly, family's cultural capital is decisively linked to educational resources available for children and, secondly, appropriate family environment usually generates equally appropriate attitudes towards education and associates skills. Data from Survey about Household Expenditures in Education 2007, carried out by National Statistics Institute, shows that the expenses in education are significantly different if we look at educational level and professional activities of breadwinners.

It has been also observed that the *cultural capital* has its corresponding translation into *social class*, whose belonging acts as an influential factor regarding percentages of 16 and 17 year-old population enrolled in post-compulsory secondary education. Parents' labour qualification can be considered as influential in a number of aspects. This point has been approached focused on the still underlying inequalities in enrolment rates, which has a particular meaning given that, apart from individual achievement, parents' working condition becomes an ingredient amenable to be affecting children's future perspectives and parents' will to invest in

education for their offspring. In this sense, it has been observed (Calero, 2006) how more than 72 per cent of children of manual non-qualified workers' drop out after compulsory education, with a similarly high figure (63.6) for the other worse-off group, agrarian workers. In these cases, both the comparatively lower qualification - and, therefore, educational level- and the worse economic condition can be considered as very strongly defining elements at this stage that is the normal route to University studies.

Data referring to number of books at home, TV consumption, availability at home of the Internet and the frequency of parents' assistance with children's homework are sufficiently meaningful of the diverse atmospheres offered in the respective cultural backgrounds (Pérez-Díaz, Rodríguez & Sánchez, 2004). These last aforementioned figures are clear indicators of the degree of parental involvement in their offspring's education. In this way, trying to define the specific mechanisms working in this contemporary form of *cultural capital*, it is expected that the differential availability of cultural resources at home would make easier a differential achievement at school for the offspring living in these diverse cultural environments.

The number of books available at home remarkably differs on the ground of the different educational levels, with an especially noticeable gap between individuals with University degrees and without studies (Survey about Participation of Adult Population in Learning Activity 2011, National Statistical Institute). A similar value, in that it is related to reading habits so strongly connected with success in education, has the data (from the same aforementioned source) related to the frequency of newspapers' reading by educational level. Percentages turn out to be increasing as we are going up in the educational level in the case of interviewees that read newspapers on a nearly daily basis; and the opposite occurs when it comes to data related to extreme low frequency of reading of newspapers. This factor can be thought as a good indicator of propitiatory habits in offspring's family settings. The diversity of factors involved in the mechanism of *cultural capital* has been widely covered by Spanish authors.

And this unequal availability of resources -both material and immaterial- is connected, in the Spanish case, to the duality existing in the educational system between *private-owned* and *public-owned* centers, with diverse consequences as the different chances of promotion from one course to the following (Gimeno, 2004, pp. 187-190). *Parents' cultural level* variable is present in Spanish reality, as well, as an explanatory ingredient in relation to centre ownership, in that it is possible to find a noticeably higher presence of highly-qualified and educated progenitors in private educational institutions (INECSE, 2005, p. 60). Meanwhile, it has also been observed that academic achievement is more satisfactory in private centres (INECSE, 2005, pp. 58, 95 and 147; Instituto de Evaluación, 2010, pp. 160 and 162). Indeed, public/private dualism is apt to be approached as an additional -but significant- factor. Comparing total percentages of respondents who studied in the different types of educational centers with the corresponding percentages classified by their highest achieved educational level it is possible to find significant remarks about the influence of the private/public dualism in the long term (Survey on Spanish Youth 2007, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas).

This reality has become particularly apt to misunderstandings, and recent data from Instituto de Evaluación makes clear -by taking into consideration the so-called *Socio-economic and Cultural Index* (ISEC)- that results have to be analyzed at the light of social setting of both students and centers (*op. cit.*, pp. 162 and 163). Reasons for this differential achievement have -as far as our data are concerned- *nothing to do with an intrinsically higher quality of teaching in private centres*, but with sociological traits of students. In fact, students with less favourable educational conditions (mainly, immigrants, ethnic minorities, and marginal and rural populations) are more widely tended by state-owned centres, and, subsequently, results from these groups are numerically reflected in them. In the opposite sense, students with the highest parents' cultural background are statistically more prone to be included in the most favourable *social* conditions offered by private centres.

Study-based labour market position

How could these years in contemporary Spain be defined when it comes to the role of cultural level in the labour market? We can say that we are not living in the atmosphere of prosperity, sharp economic growth and, specially, full-employment that characterized *human capital* proponents' years; on the contrary, Spanish population has to live with certain degrees of unemployment, specially of what could be called *qualified unemployment*, since the vast majority of the highly educated work force does not wish to work in certain kinds of *inappropriate* jobs. It is possible to talk, then, paraphrasing Thurow, about a 'queue of *qualified* employment'.

Though aforementioned Thurow's viewpoint was originally referring to unemployment situations that stem from the 70s crises, it seems that he was, to a great extent, right even for current times, given that high qualifications and educational levels lose part of the value that was arising from an offer/demand mechanism. What becomes true is that in *crisis* a University qualified worker could be in the same queue for subsidies as an illiterate one, but, even in these contexts, qualified work force will face the professional future with better prospects.

In this sense, if something can be considered as very especially defining Spanish culture towards work, it is certainly the wish to get a job in the public sector, as a consequence of the deep concern for stability that characterizes our attitudes when it comes to economic activity. In this sense, we would like to highlight how the level of studies predominant in the public sector (civil service and public-owned companies) is University, with a remarkable difference compared with private sector, moreover. Even in underemployment cases, University studies become a way, in short, to get not only better incomes, but as well a more desirable position where stability has a major weight, which turns out to be a particularly decisive factor for a majority of job seekers (Survey on Spanish Youth 2007, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas).

Conclusion: the influence of parents' educational level on children's development

This paper was originally conceived as a means to put into words and figures how the educational level still behaves as the Ariadna's thread that let us get out of

the labyrinth of social circumstances. It is not possible to talk in rigour, as it is frequently done, of a *determining* effect of cultural level in intergenerational transmissions. We would rather talk about *conditioning* influences, in that all the figures in the tables and graphs above show how, in the first step, parents' cultural level has proved to affect children's educational development and expectations, with a view in the role that the private/public dualism plays in this complex game.

This, in turn, becomes the way for diverse higher education degrees that, *statistically* speaking, have shown a positive effect on working activity, as much in relation to incomes as in presence in the most envied sector of the Spanish economy. In particular, in spite of the depth of the social changes that have contributed to diminishing the gap between qualified and non-qualified work force, it is possible to observe how highest educational levels still keep a comparatively privileged position in the labour market. Put another way, if we talk about *statistical conditionings* we emphasize that social factors -and particularly parental educational background- do not completely mould society newcomers' working lives, although, with no doubt, they make it easier for the potter to outline the shape that has to be given to the pre-existing clay.

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